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**The Marginal Man: An Exploration of Hypermasculinity in Black Male  
Protagonists in *Light in August*, *Native Son*, and *Invisible Man***

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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i: Introduction: A History of Racism and the Origins of Hypermasculinity

Treatment of the black male in American fiction has been a source of continuous debased stereotypical refinement. Depictions of the “Negro” during the early eighteenth hundreds evolved out of socio-political necessity, essentially supporting the institution of slavery through literature that, as Sterling Brown describes in *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937), “countered with the contented slave; when cruelties were mentioned, they dragged forward the comical and happy-hearted Negro” ignoring the more obvious and deplored reality. As time passed and the Reconstruction era surfaced, slave owners faced such threats and “dire [fates] as Negroes’ voting, going to school, and working for themselves (Negro domination),” and, thus, the stereotype of the “brute Negro” was born, a fictional southern attempt at repelling this newfound “Negro” independence. Though some white authors were in fact sympathetic, or at least not hostile, in their characterizations of the black male, they still stressed the unnatural “humanity” of the “Negro,” choosing black men or mulattoes “for their rebellious heroes, attributing militancy and intelligence to [the] white heritage” (2) of biracial characters and violence and hypersexuality to fully black characters.

As the nineteenth century progressed, black fictional figures expanded from the early comic trickster, a vague white condemnation of the slave trade, to the subservient, humble dependent, to “the buffoon, the tragic octoroon, the noble savage, and the revolter” (15). But these early subsidiary characters were

crudely constructed and projected a farcical image of blackness onto the reality of slavery and disenfranchisement. In the eighteen thirties, however, these crude characters blossomed into literary propaganda as the movement to abolish slavery gained momentum (31). Although antislavery fiction focused on the abuses and cruelties early southern fiction fails to mention, the overwhelming pattern of the docile black and militant mixed blood remains, with the occasional octoroon or quadroon, as a “concession . . . to race snobbishness even among abolitionists . . . . This was an indirect admission that a white man in chains was more pitiful to behold than the African similarly placed” (45), implying that the mere presence of downtrodden mulatto characters elicited more sympathy in white readers than a similarly placed black character ever could. Though more realistic than its proslavery counterpart, antislavery fiction often stressed the physical nature of punishments, which in turn “underemphasizes the greater wrongs, the destruction of manhood, and the ugly code of morality that slavery” (46), and more broadly, racism, fostered.

Fiction in the late eighteen nineties added some realism of speech to the old character developments but further limited black characters to either expressions of “loyalty or ingratitude” (Brown 62). These personality demarcations confined the black protagonist to strictly superficial relationships within the polar spheres of either black or white society, never allowing for an examination of black self-perception or epiphanies of masculine awareness.

Literature at the brink of the nineteen hundreds brought about a stark revision in black character roles, modifying old stereotypes and expanding into a movement known as the Harlem School of writing. The race debate broadened during this movement from the old focus group of white authors to also include black authors who, influenced by the “growing race-consciousness of the ‘greatest Negro city in the world’” (Brown 131), discovered in Harlem an “exotic, savage, world” (131) that proved influential in fictional attempts at black representation. This Harlemaesque portrayal of the “savage black world,” a revolt against “Victorian prudishness and repression, and machine-age standardization” (131), later transforms into a literary revelation of southern violence patterns against blacks, a previously unmentionable and taboo subject.

In a realistic attempt at social protest many black and white writers such as Sinclair Lewis, Langston Hughes, and Frederick Wright (Brown 169-188) turned to these taboo novelistic depictions of violence in order to authentically represent the harsh injustice of southern politics. Yet, according to Brown, the white southern writer William Faulkner was able to record Negro action with great realism. Brown states that Faulkner

gets into character with the uncanny penetration that makes him one of the most significant of the new novelists. His Negroes are a long way from happy-go-lucky comics. If they agree in anything, it is in their surly understanding of the bitter life that they are doomed to live in a backward, hate-ridden South. He does not write social protest, but he is

fiercely intent upon the truth, and the truth that he sees is tragic (Brown 179).

In his novel *Light in August* (1932), Faulkner expands and reworks this generic depiction of mulatto characters in his portrayal of Joe Christmas to create one of the first “fully characterized” black males by a white author, using the accessibility of Joe’s white heritage to draw in white readers. Joe is “more complex than Faulkner’s other Negroes . . . and one of Faulkner’s most memorable creations” (Brown 178). As critic Philip Weinstein argues

in spite of his socialization and acculturation, Faulkner struggles both to represent and to explain the existence and persistence of racism within not merely Southern society, but American society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His more conscious awareness of blacks as an inevitable, complex and intricate aspect of American life separates him from a number of United States authors in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who ignored and erased blacks from any visibility whatsoever in their depiction of American society (*Faulkner* 101 1).

Faulkner does not hide the presence of the “Negro” behind a false veil of proslavery propaganda. He instead produces a fully realized black male protagonist situated firmly within an unstable racist society, stressing the “inevitability” of the black presence in America. Another critic, Arthur F. Kinney, suggests that Faulkner makes the “racial myth palatable, understandable, and eventually something that could be accommodated, because the fact of

[miscegenation] in the South was so obvious and so uncomfortable” (Kinney 1). Faulkner intends that white America acknowledge the presence, if not the humanity, of mulattoes by choosing a racially mixed character as one of his protagonists. Though considered black by white society, much of the literature during this period implies that both white and black communities alike rejected mulattoes as racial oddities. Joe Christmas represents a racial amalgam, vacillating between two worlds, black and white, that have both denied him societal acceptance.

Just eight years after *Light in August* appeared, Richard Wright, a black author and great admirer of Faulkner’s (*Conversations with Richard Wright* 1), revises Faulkner’s creation. Wright once told an interviewer that Faulkner was one of his favorite writers because “He is the only white writer I know of living in Mississippi who is trying to tell the truth [about the real South] in fiction” (10). Whereas Faulkner focuses on the interplaying environments and external relationships of suppression and racist thought, Wright delves crudely and intimately into the psychology of one black male’s mind. He uses the idea of the “brutish” and violent mulatto male as a starting point, but centers his novel, *Native Son*, on one primary and fully black protagonist. Whereas both writers focus on the “destruction of manhood” and the “ugly code of morality” fostered by segregation, as a “Negro artist,” Wright “must accept the responsibility of being the ultimate portrayer of [his] own” (4). He creates in protagonist Bigger Thomas an extremely mutated version of black masculinity, exaggerating and

contorting Bigger into a hypersexual, violent being of monumental proportions. In his essay “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright details five instances in his life that influenced his creation of Bigger Thomas. He states, “If I had known only one Bigger I would not have written *Native Son*,” implying that this violent phenomenon, though not universal, does pose a significant threat to the wellbeing of American society. He urges whites and blacks alike to acknowledge and address this danger and the roots of this violence. Wright ends his essay saying,

The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet brief spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken (“How Bigger Was Born” 3).

Thus, the system of racism sets black men up to fail – those too weak or frightened to rebel resign to a life of oppression and those who rise up against racism are singled out and systematically broken. Bigger Thomas, both compelling and repelling, serves as a monstrous symbol of society’s willing blindness to the black plight. Wright’s literary artistry in *Native Son* and portrayal of this plight attracted Faulkner’s attention in 1940, compelling Faulkner to compose a letter to Wright “commending his courage for saying what ‘needed to be said’ about race relations in America” (Inge).



William Faulkner in *Light in August* and Richard Wright in *Native Son* depict the plight of black males through the exaggerated masculinity, or hypermasculinity, of their protagonists – the “mulatto” Joe Christmas and Bigger Thomas, respectively. The theory of Hypermasculinity is appropriate for analyzing these characters because it refers to the inflated desire or need for male expression, often appearing in men who have been alienated or repressed in society. According to Scheff, it “appears that most men in . . . society are more alienated/repressed than most women, the idea of hypermasculinity is used to develop a theory of conflict.” A theory highly applicable to the effects of racism, hypermasculinity in black men suggests a heightened need for control in the face of a suffocating, external white dominance that diffuses black male identity through compartmentalization and feelings of shame: “If a whole nation were to feel ashamed it would be like a lion recoiling in order to spring.” The combination of “alienation with the repression of vulnerable emotions suggests a biosocial doomsday machine that leads to cascading violence and destructiveness” (1). The two novels follow the same novelistic formula and spring from a narrative culture of white entrapment. The formula stages include animal brutality as a prophetic predictor of future transgressions, a primary and secondary murderous episode against figures of competing races, a reactionary flight from white society, and the ultimate capture and death, or foreshadowed death, of the black male. Although Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* diverges somewhat from the strict formula, he also explores the progression of the black

male identity crisis in conjunction with a violent, but fated, attitude toward white America. *Invisible Man*, however, emphasizes more broadly an internal expression of hypermasculinity in its protagonist versus the external criminology of Joe Christmas and Bigger Thomas.

Ralph Ellison, however, renowned black author and associate of Richard Wright, criticized Bigger's lack of consciousness, rejecting both Wright's horrific prophetic vision of black masculinity and Faulkner's portrayal of black figures. Faulkner once noted, "Another [black writer] named Ralph Ellison has talent and so far has managed to stay away from being first a Negro, he is still first a writer" (*Lion in the Garden* 185), emphasizing Ellison's heightened subjectivity towards accurate black representation in the race debate. Ellison however "always [remained] uneasy about Faulkner . . . [and] while he thought Faulkner had explored black experience 'more successfully than anyone else,' he also found 'mixed motives' in his frequent use of black stereotypes. Nevertheless, he believed that Faulkner was the 'greatest writer the South has produced'" (Inge 1).<sup>1</sup> Although, according to Inge, Ellison creates in his novel *Invisible Man* (1952) a very Faulknerian novel in "its uses of time, narrative consciousness, and surreal structure" (Inge), he noticeably departs from both Faulkner's and Wright's vision of black masculinity. Instead, Ellison chooses to create a black protagonist that only borders on Bigger Thomas's hypermasculinity - vacillating between moments of restrained lucidity and overwhelming needs for aggression

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted material within Inge's statement was taken from *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John E. Callahan. New York: Modern Library. (1995): 86, 97.

and sexuality – attempting to present a more self-aware, articulate version of the black character by giving his protagonist a choice between restraint and action; he is “more concerned with the way a man confronts his individual doom than with the derivation of that doom” (Warren 200). Whereas Bigger does not seem to have a choice and follows on a seemingly fated path, the Invisible Man exercises control; he clearly possesses the hypermasculine mindset and the ability to commit horrific acts, but he rises above the racism that urges his downfall to uphold a more authentic black morality and sense of self.

Joe Christmas, Bigger Thomas, and the Invisible Man all display the stereotypical racial traits and “cascading” violence that define a hypermasculinized male to different extents but for similar reasons. Only through an exaggerated expression of stereotypical male desires and actions, can each begin to establish the black male identity that white America continuously denies them. As discussed in the chapters that follow, for Joe and Bigger in particular, acts of violence, against both animals and women define this quest for male identity, where women symbolize subconscious usurpers of masculine power through the dispersal of food and sex, two highly masculine aspirations.

## ii: Masculine Violence and the Female Body

Threatened and abused, beaten and broken, Joe Christmas and Bigger Thomas of *Light in August* and *Native Son* both unleash a frantic violence upon their supposed aggressors. Foreshadowed by horrific animal killing episodes, their respective murders of Joanna Burden and Mary Dalton, two white women,

shape and reaffirm a black sense of self through displays of violence and sexual prowess – examples of masculine identity triggers. The culture of racism during the Jim Crow era in the South influenced this image of the animalistic black male manifesting his masculinity through violence; medical experts uphold the fact that “psychological attacks on the self [through racism], such as insults, humiliation, or threats, can cause aggressive [counter] reactions” evoking strong feelings of shame (*Patterns of Victimization in Light in August 1*). Shame, a powerful motivator, incites Joe and Bigger to rebel against an oppression that specifically targets the collective consciousness, or racial identity, of the black male, and, ultimately, to murder the white women who come to symbolize this system of unlawful segregation and black de-masculinization. Masculine or strong-willed women, like Joanna and Mary, provoke and incite these same men. Joe Christmas and Bigger Thomas murder Joanna Burden and Mary Dalton for the same reasons, almost through identical means, and with a strikingly similar method of bodily disposal. Bigger, however, also murders Bessie, a black woman, and it is in his treatment of the latter that the archetypal image of the hypermasculine black male presented by Faulkner and Wright most reveals the effects of the psychology of racism on black men.

Joe Christmas symbolizes both predator and prey in *Light in August*: he acts as the “focal point of a pervading cultural matrix of racial and sexual ideology” (*Menstrual Blood and “Nigger” Blood* 391). The product of racial stereotyping and unwanted female support, both sexually and domestically, Joe

develops a negative view of women as secretive with a “taint of evil” (*Light in August* 168), viewing his male associations in a much more positive and straightforward light, where interactions are based on a system of rewards and punishments (*Menstrual Blood and “Nigger” Blood* 168). His later relations with Joanna Burden, his white female sexual partner and supporter, only cements this negative view of femininity and his confusion over his “role” as a black male. He is caged within the

cultural significance of his own possibly biracial, definitely male body.

This matrix of race and sex envelops Christmas from his earliest memories until his last breath. The body of Joe, abandoned on Christmas Eve, abused for seeking pleasure, beaten by a fanatical Christian stepfather, hated and lusted after for its racial ambiguity, and finally mutilated, becomes, in *Light in August*, the aesthetic symbol of the “cross” of race and sex in the American mind. In reacting to himself as symbol, Joe Christmas centers his rage and his obsession on his ‘blood’ – the stuff which ‘writes’ his body into the culture, the stuff which defines his body socially. As a racially ambiguous body, it is his ‘nigger blood’ which condemns Joe in the white world. To Joe, however, the condemnation is intensified because he is male (*Menstrual Blood and “Nigger” Blood* 394).

As a man and as a symbol of the “cross,” Joe can never be free of the threat of his black blood as women can through the monthly physical and symbolic letting of their “black” blood through menstruation – a fact which separates him, in his

mind, negatively from females and “intensifies” the “condemnation” of his black heritage. Thus, when first confronted with the idea of sexuality through a highly graphic description of menstruation, Joe becomes both disgusted and intrigued, finding the monthly female ordeal revolting while also reveling in the thought of the expulsion of blood. In a prepubescent attempt to introspectively understand female sexuality, Joe set out on a solo walk through the woods and later “found [a flock of sheep] in a hidden valley and stalked and killed one with the gun. Then he knelt, his hands in the yet warm blood of the dying beast, trembling, dry-mouthed, backglaring” (*Light in August* 184). Killing the sheep allows Joe to participate in the physical ceremony of female expulsion; he kills the beast because he resents the confinement of his male body that traps the “filth” (185) of his black blood. Joe’s slaughter of the sheep foreshadows his later violence and murder of Joanna Burden, the physical embodiment of the revolting female sexuality he despises.

Joe Christmas meets Joanna Burden when he comes across her house during his travels. He needs food and shelter, so he waits until nightfall before stealing from her kitchen. Later, after she discovers his presence, she permits him to reside in a cabin on her property, ultimately in exchange for sexual favors. Unfortunately for Joanna, she crosses the boundary between caregiver and masculine usurper, forcing Joe to acknowledge his detested black heritage by emphasizing her female “whiteness” in contrast to his male “blackness.” As an amalgam of different environments, races, and situations, Joe essentially

possesses no “inherent sense of identity . . . [he] is at the complete mercy of his culture to provide one for him” (*Menstrual Blood and “Nigger” Blood* 399). He provokes so he can fight: “he would remember how he had once tricked or teased white men into calling him a negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten; now he fought the negro who called him white” (*Light in August* 225) and later the woman who shows him he is black. Although Joanna is clearly female, Joe often describes her sexuality in masculine terms: “It was as if he struggled physically with another man for an object of no actual value to either, and for which they struggle on principle alone” (235). He thinks, “My God . . . it was like I was the woman and she was the man” (235). Joanna’s masculine qualities threaten to overthrow Joe’s own masculine sense of identity, creating a fierce struggle between the genders for “male” supremacy. When faced with the prospect of Joanna Burden’s menopause and therefore the end of her menstrual cycle, Joe Christmas becomes repulsed, staunchly refusing her pleas to kneel and pray; menopause, or infertility, only furthers Joanna’s masculine nature by divorcing her of her female potential, while also angering Joe by reminding him of his inability to expel his black blood through a similar process.

Though posed and praying with a gun to her head, set on carrying out a joint suicide with her mulatto lover, Joanna Burden instead invokes a deadly, deeply rooted fury in Joe Christmas. Denying her suicide by bullet, Joe slices her throat with a razor, nearly decapitating her (288); he rejects religion and resurrection, able to find meaning only through Joanna’s death and acts of violence. A bullet to

the head at the right angle would have been instantaneous and virtually bloodless, but Joe wants Burden to suffer. By murdering Burden, an androgynous figure symbolizing white masculinity, he spills her white female blood, symbolically cutting off the head of the racist white patriarchy that first refuses him a male identity then forces him to become the “brutish ape” of white nightmares. Shortly after her murder, Burden’s house goes up in flames, with her ravaged body lying among the timbers. In a reversal of roles, the burning of her body echoes the white mob-like lynchings of alleged black offenders. Acts of lynching were extremely prevalent between “1882 and 1927, an estimated 4,951 persons were lynched in the United States. Of that number, 3513 were black and 76 of those were black women. Alleged murder, rape, and other ‘minor offenses’ were the major causes of lynchings and burnings” *Exorcising blackness* 7). Many were “burned or ‘roasted alive’”, with thirty-four percent of the total lynched or burned for supposed rape or crimes against white women; “Protecting white womanhood became *the* emotional stimulus to a mob” (*Exorcising blackness* 7).<sup>2</sup> Thus, instead of being lynched himself, Joe Christmas murders and “roasts” Burden’s body for white “crimes against” black males, using her white body as a medium through which he can convey his need to rebel against the oppressive forces of segregation, culminating in the fiery destruction of her house, a symbol of white supremacy because of its association with Joanna Burden’s privileged white heritage.

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<sup>2</sup> Faulkner demonstrates the irony of this as a motivation in his short story “Dry September.”



Joe Christmas culminates his complex struggle with the opposing forces of identity and invisibility in a reactionary violent outburst. He “embodies the [“Negro”] figure as an interracial sexual threat . . . [and] does not fit tidily into African American [character] types; rather, Faulkner conflates characteristics of these [earlier] figures in Joe with attention to the interracial sexual anxieties they created for the white South” (*In the Shadow* 111). Captured and returned to the hysterical townspeople after his murder of Joanna Burden, a white civil rights activist with whom he developed a sexual relationship, he unsettles and subverts white expectations of racial identity. Joe Christmas “never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made folks so mad . . . It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too” (*Light In August* 350). He possesses the ability to take on multiple racial identities, but is identified as black by the white townspeople as an “extension of his behavior. The identification of Joe as ‘nigger’ by the townspeople, who were previously unaware of his black heritage, because he murders a white woman coalesces the threat of invisible blackness with the threat of the black beast into a single entity” (*In the Shadow* 110). As a mulatto of debatable origins, the burden of his supposed “terrible” black heritage perpetually weighs on Joe, and the stereotypes associated with being black gradually leak through, overpowering any previous individual sense of self. He begins to act “black,” fulfilling the prophesy of his skin, creating in Joe an arguable case of nurture versus nature, where Joe is seemingly fated to behave in a certain “black” way merely because

he has been perceived as “black.” Through Joe, Faulkner argues that this stereotypical vision of “blackness” is degrading to manhood and self-perception, that the psychology of segregation prevents any racial dualism and, thus, has the potential to incite hysteria in both the black male and the white community that targets him for violence.

Bigger Thomas, of *Native Son*, both embodies and demonstrates the power of racial stereotyping in his slaughter of a rat. Stereotypical images of blacks include the “beast and savage, heathen, victim, devil, servant and entertainer, and the ‘merry nigger,’ which have all been part of colonialist discourse” (*Richard Wright’s Native Son* 86). In the opening scenes, a “black beast” invades Bigger’s squalid apartment, creating a parallel between the “savagery” of the black rodent and the racially implied aggression of Bigger’s skin; identified as a threat before doing anything to target Bigger’s violence, the rat, like Bigger, must react with violence in order to counter the aggression of opposing forces. Bigger’s violence directed toward the rat is “a projection of his anger and hatred toward his own social role . . . for the rat . . . symbolizes [his] family’s poverty as well as Bigger’s fierce hatred [of] the enormous forces that confront him. Eventually, too, Bigger himself will be caught like a rat” (*Richard Wright’s Native Son* 86). Daily bombarded with unrequited hostility from a dominant racist society, Bigger immediately recognizes and despises in the rat his own struggle with an undeserved identity. Seeing in the rat the “heathen” qualities an

oppressive white patriarchy delegates to Bigger himself, he becomes infuriated, attacking the rat as he has been attacked. He kicks the “beast” and the

force of his movement shook the rat loose and it sailed through the air and struck a wall. Instantly, it rolled over and leaped again. Bigger dodged and the rat landed against a table leg. With clenched teeth, Bigger held the skillet; he was afraid to hurl it, fearing that he might miss. The rat squeaked and turned and ran in a narrow circle, looking for a place to hide; it leaped again past Bigger and scurried on dry rasping feet to one side of the box then to the other, searching for the hole. Then it turned and reared upon its hind legs (*Native Son* 9).

Just as the box prevents the rat from escaping into a dark hole of protection and anonymity, an endless cycle of poverty and racism traps Bigger in a desperate future he cannot avoid. Refusing to accept the bleak fate of Bigger’s rage, the rat emits “a long thin song of defiance” (10), trying, like Bigger, either to “defeat or gratify powerful impulses in a world he feared” (44). Both lash out against the respective hopelessness in their worlds - attacking when threatened. This instinct for survival coupled with a pervasive, hostile racism, predicts Bigger’s future violence, with the killing of the rat foreshadowing his murders of Mary Dalton and Bessie.

The circumstances surrounding the rat’s death parallel Bigger’s murders, creating an inevitable circular violence. Bigger kills the rat by taking “a shoe and [pounding] the rat’s head, crushing it, cursing hysterically: ‘You sonofabitch’”

(10). His repetitive crushing of the rat mirrors “the jarring of the brick’s impact” (222) on his girlfriend Bessie’s skull, silencing her because “he could not take her with him and he could not leave her behind” (220); she knew too much and he must murder her to prolong his own survival in the frenzied white world. After killing the rat, Bigger “wrapped [it] in a newspaper” (11), drawing a direct comparison to Mary’s murder and the “neat layer of newspapers [he spreads] beneath the head, so that the blood would not drip on the floor” (91). The rat episode, therefore, creates an ominous foreboding mood, suggesting the unavoidability, in Bigger’s case, of the need for violence in the face of a demasculinating white suppression; Bigger knows that “the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else” (14). Finally, after Bigger’s capture, a crowd of white onlookers echoes Bigger’s hysterical cursing of the rat yelling, “that black sonofabitch! . . . Kill that black ape!” (253). This declaration connects the fated deaths of both Bigger and the rat at the hands of their oppressors.

Mary Dalton’s death, though accidental, redefines Bigger’s masculine existence. After a night out, Bigger chauffeurs the intoxicated Mary home and drags her limp body up the stairs to her bedroom. Fearful of discovery because of the implications of his black presence, he muffles her drunken mumblings with the edge of a pillow, unknowingly suffocating her in the process. When he realizes he has killed her, the “reality of the room fell from him; the vast city of white people that sprawled outside took its place. She was dead and he had

killed her. He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman" (*Native Son* 86). Because of racism, Bigger defines the world in polarities, black and white, male and female. He exists on one side of the spectrum, as a black male, and Mary, a white female, on the opposite. As a white person, Mary symbolizes the oppression and segregation Bigger associates with the entire white race. Though "she was beautiful [and] slender, with an air that made him feel that she did not hate him with the hate of other white people . . . she was white and he hated her" (81). At the same time, as a white female, Mary represents a temptation even more deadly, for she holds a forbidden sexuality that he desires, but relations, either real or suspected, with white women were often punishable by lynching. Thus, in retrospect, Bigger thinks his "crime seemed natural" (101); he destroys the intangible threat of her white sexuality with the tangible reality of death and disposal in the fiery pits of a furnace. By killing a white woman, Bigger takes the ultimate stand against his racist suppression. He murders, creating a new life – a new masculinity – for himself and "for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared" (101). Bigger, thus, becomes a physical manifestation of the violent black male depicted in the media and feared by white society, yet he celebrates his "new" self and basks even if temporarily in his black masculine power.

Though her murder may have been accidental, the gruesome dismemberment he inflicts on her white body in death symbolizes his frenzied

desire to section off, weaken, and destroy the white forces that have continuously denied him an individual voice; white suppression suffocates his black manhood like he ultimately suffocates expressions of white female sexuality and liberation through killing Mary. Bigger even states that when he thinks about his state of oppression “sometimes [he] can’t hardly breathe . . .” (24) and he says, “That’s when I feel like something awful’s going to happen to me . . . . It’s like I was going to do something I can’t help” (24), enforcing the “inevitability” of his crime. Although in a state of extreme panic after her death, Bigger embarks in a series of highly conscious brutal acts involving the disposal of Mary’s body, the evidence of his black crime. He first contorts her limbs, cramming her into a trunk much like he confines the dead rat to a box, in order to carry her downstairs undetected. Mind racing,

he stared at the furnace. He trembled with another idea. He – he could, he – he could put her, he could put her *in* the furnace. He would *burn* her! That was the safest thing of all to do . . . . He went to the door of the furnace and paused. The fire seethed. Ought he to put her in head or feet first? Because he was tired and scared, and because her feet were nearer, he pushed her in, feet first . . . . He gripped her shoulders and pushed hard, but the body would not go any farther. He tried again, but her head still remained out (89-90).

In a reversal of white predetermined racial roles, Bigger, like Joe Christmas, disposes of his white victim’s body using fire, essentially lynching the white female transgressor. By shoving her in the furnace feet first, he cuts off the

potential for white movement; he wants to contain and destroy her whiteness and the racial oppression her body symbolizes. He manages to get most of her torso into the furnace before realizing he cannot push any further - he must decapitate her as Joe nearly decapitates Joanna.

He got his knife from his pocket and opened it and stood by the furnace, looking at Mary's white throat . . . . Gently, he sawed into the flesh and struck a bone. He gritted his teeth and cut harder . . . . He whacked at the bone with the knife. The head hung limply on the newspapers, the curly black hair dragging about in the blood. He whacked harder, but the head would not come off (90-91).

In order to fully decapitate her, however, he must use a hatchet and "after pausing in an attitude of prayer, [sends] the blade of the hatchet into the bone of the throat with all the strength of his body. The head rolled off" (91). His pause of prayer echoes Joanna Burden's plea that Joe kneel and pray with her, a request that incites in Joe a murderous rage acted out with a razor, comparable to Bigger's pocket knife. But Bigger, more highly exaggerated than his mulatto counterpart, takes his black aggression one step further - by choosing a hatchet and fully severing a head that Joe leaves hanging by the bone. Thus, Bigger unconsciously fulfills the southern phobia of fused sexual fears surrounding the socially perceived "hyperactive" black male sexuality by murdering Mary, burning her body, and implicating himself if caught, which he inevitably is, in the disposal of evidence of his "rape" of a white woman. But by burning her

corpse in the furnace to hide his crime, he can [also indirectly] triumph over the white myth of black as totally powerless to act without white manipulation . . . . He has now reversed the master-slave relationship between the Daltons and himself, for he has victimized the oppressor and controlled the situation of which they are ignorant (*Richard Wright's Native Son* 87).

By reversing this racially projected power dynamic, Bigger also invalidates the hierarchical order of white power; killing a white female, a symbol of beauty and innocence, allows Bigger to strike out at America's most "sensitive nerve," freeing himself from his own designated image of blackness and rigid control of black sexuality (*Richard Wright's Native Son* 88). As the protagonist from the *Invisible Man* puts it, "Why did [white men] have to mix their women into everything? Between us and everything we wanted to change in the world they placed a woman: socially, politically, economically. Why, goddamit, why did they insist upon confusing the class struggle with the ass struggle, debasing both us and them – all human motives?" (*Invisible Man* 418).

Although not premeditated, Bigger's second act of violence is deliberate and calculated: he rapes and murders Bessie, his girlfriend. Bigger uses Bessie as a buffer; she becomes a medium through which he can transition from the dreaded anxiety born of suppression into a superficially constructed state of power. Killing Mary Dalton sets him apart and gives his life purpose, but terrorizing Bessie puts him in a position of dominance where he becomes the



oppressor he has spent his entire life fighting against. Bigger enjoys “her agony, seeing and feeling the worth of himself in her bewildered desperation” (140) and in her desire not to get involved with his fatal plotting. Bessie “was afraid and he could handle her through her fear” (138) just as whites controlled Bigger, stunting his growth as an individual and making him subservient to white society. As an oppressor, Bigger categorizes Bessie, seeing in her tired eyes all of the black women of the ghetto and in her body something that “he had just had and wanted badly again” (133). Thus, Bigger never truly sees Bessie as possessing a unique personality distinct from the general haze of blackness, and he underestimates her capacity for intelligence. He becomes surprised and feels threatened when Bessie realizes he murdered Mary Dalton, and he begins to feel as “he had felt when he stood over Mary’s bed with the white blur [Mary’s mother] drawing near” (168). Bigger despises feeling this racial fear, an emotion that sends “him plunging again into murder” (168), so he follows his killing of Mary Dalton, his white suppressor, with his murder of Bessie, a woman who makes him doubt his newfound masculine assurance and black male pride in his act of white defiance.

While tempted by Mary, Bigger instead sexually assaults Bessie, who, as black and thus “racially inferior” to Mary, is less threatening; in her blackness she symbolizes an easy victory that further upholds and supports his newfound pride in his masculine identity. After his sexual desires have been satisfied,

however, satiated and empty he methodically reasons out a murderous plot to rid him of the burden of her presence:

He couldn't take her and he couldn't leave her; so he would have to kill her. It was his life against hers. Quickly, to make certain where he must strike, he switched on the light, fearing as he did so that it might awaken her; then switched it off again, retaining as an image before his eyes her black face calm in deep sleep . . . . He lifted the brick again and again, until in falling it struck a sodden mass that gave softly but stoutly to each landing blow. Soon he seemed to be striking a wet wad of cotton, of some damp substance whose only life was the jarring of the brick's impact (222).

He systematically brings the brick down again and again, striking her skull, murdering her slowly in the dark, unsure where her face is but willing himself to continue striking her with the only image in his mind that of her "black face." He kills her merely because she is black – her skin reminds him of his own which in turn incites feelings of racial shame that he tried to bury by burning Mary's white body. Bigger temporarily escapes from

the insecurities, the fears, the feelings of inferiority etched into the Negro psyche by centuries of repression in a white-dominated society. In Bessie, he sees a continuation of those mental chains. She is still lazily amoral, timid, compliant – in short, the Sambo personality which threatens the existence of the new Bigger. In order to live, Bigger must destroy her, the last link which

reminds him of and binds him to his Negroness (*Richard Wright's Native Son* 88).

Merely raping and killing her in an abandoned, forgotten building is not enough. He must further hide the evidence of Bessie's blackness by pushing her ruined, though still living, body into an air-shaft. When he lets go, "the body [hits] and [bumps] against the narrow sides of the [shaft] as it [goes] down into blackness. He [hears] it strike the bottom" (*Native Son* 224). Thus, into blackness and out of blackness he releases Bessie's black body to the black fate Bigger so desperately tries to blind himself to and escape from. Bigger burns Mary's body, lynching and decapitating her, but he essentially freezes Bessie alive, dedicating to fire the white woman and to ice the black; fire represents the burning passion of Bigger's hatred toward his racial categorization and ice the numbing paralysis of a lifetime of racial fear. Murder becomes "the negative version of [white success and freedom], but since it is an act of creation for him, it is the only success myth in the name of freedom that he can ever have: 'But what I killed for I, am'" (*Richard Wright's Native Son* 91).

Bigger Thomas represents an extreme outlier of the violent black male stereotype. His acts of murder, one deliberate and one accidental, become vehicles through which he can assert his phantom-like black existence. Bigger believes that violence will make him appear stronger and create a superficial façade of control behind which he can hide; his crime becomes "an anchor weighing him safely in time; it added to him a certain confidence which his gun

and knife did not" (*Native Son* 101) as mere totems of power. The physicality of murder becomes a means through which Bigger can define his life and declare, in his mind, masculine power over weaker female forms. By killing Mary Dalton, a woman who represents white America, Bigger seeks out a "possible [avenue] of escape" (110), setting himself apart from others, both black and white, and rebelling against the conventions and oppression of white society.

Unlike Bigger Thomas and Joe Christmas, the protagonist of *Invisible Man*, does not commit horrifically violent acts, but the narrative suggests he possesses the underlying potential to do so. The protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* begins his narration with the words, "'I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (*Invisible Man* 3), stating his belief that white society staunchly and repeatedly rejects acknowledgement of his black male existence. The protagonist declares that after a lifetime of racial invisibility

You [begin] to wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in the other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you (4).

Thus, Ellison constructs an alternate reality where race relations can be described in terms of a dream-like underworld, where the sleeper, or white

individual, lashes out at the invading black figure of his nightmare that threatens the balance of white power. He declares, "Most of the time (although I do not choose as I once did to deny the violence of my days by ignoring it) I am not so overtly violent. I remember that I am invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones" (*Invisible Man* 5), meaning simply that he chooses his black anonymity over white awareness and a potential violent outburst.

The novel does, however, open with an act of aggression, drawing a comparison between the respective rat and sheep slaughter scenes from *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*. After being verbally assaulted by a white man upon bumping him in the street, the invisible man loses physical control and attacks the perpetrator, watching the blood gush out and finding enjoyment in his oppressor's desperate struggle. As the frenzy heightens, the invisible man thinks,

Oh yes, I kicked him! And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him in the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth . . . . He lay there, moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed by a phantom.

It unnerved me. I was both disgusted and ashamed. I was like a drunken man myself, wavering about on weakened legs. Then I was amused (4-5).

His actions are not premeditated, but spring from a deep hatred born of white suppression; he acts on instinct and out of a manic anger, feeling the urge, like Joe and Bigger, to slice a white throat with his knife. This frenzied, violent outburst is a departure from his normally controlled, aloof behavior. Though he

does not kill the white man or often engage in these displays of violence, his hypermasculinity remains a significant part of him, as with Bigger Thomas and Joe Christmas, although his manifests in a less physically violent form. Ellison downplays the need for violence, not exactly rejecting the previous black character formulas of his predecessors, but revising the stereotypical image of the aggressive black male to fit more accurately into the daily reality of the black masses.

Hypermasculinity refers not only to criminal acts but also to a set of beliefs held by the individual (Scheff), and the invisible man clearly possesses the ability to commit similar crimes and the desire to “strike out with [his] fists” (4). This exaggerated form of masculinity often manifests itself in individuals whose gender roles have been challenged by racial stereotypes or suppression (Scheff 1). The invisible man – along with Faulkner and Wright – thus, questions who should take responsibility for this violence, the black perpetrator or the white instigator:

Take the man whom I almost killed: Who was responsible for that near murder – I? I don’t think so, and I refuse it. I won’t buy it. You can’t give it to me. *He* bumped *me*, *he* insulted *me*. Shouldn’t he, for his own personal safety, have recognized my hysteria, my “danger potential”? He, let us say, was lost in a dream world. But didn’t *he* control that dream world – which, alas, is only too real! – and didn’t *he* rule me out of it? . . . I was the

irresponsible one; for I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society . . . . I was a coward (14).

Ellison blames black outbursts on white oppression, just as Faulkner and Wright do, arguing to some extent that racism breeds “hysteria,” creating a so-called “danger potential” within the heart of every black “victim”: The harsh environment of oppression can lead to the creation of many “Biggers,” and the resulting acts of violence attributed not to the black male himself, but to the white creator – the society that molds the conditions through which these individuals can be formed. However, Ellison, unlike Faulkner and Wright, gives his protagonist a choice between good and evil, stressing the importance of morality and humanity in black representation. In the preface of his novel *Shadow and Act*, Ellison says:

I found the greatest difficulty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, rather than serving up what Negroes were supposed to feel, and were encouraged to feel. And linked to this was the difficulty, based upon our long habit of deception and evasion, of depicting what really happened within our areas of American life, and putting down with honesty and without bowing to ideological expediencies the attitudes and values which give Negro American life its sense of wholeness and which renders it bearable and human, and when measured by our own terms, desirable (14).

Although the formula of “Negro” victimization with the response of a countering black violence represents a legitimate and easily argued interpretation of black discrimination, Ellison revises this earlier archetype to mold a more truthful construction of black identity.

Joe Christmas, Bigger Thomas, and the Invisible Man display varying degrees of violence, specifically against animals and women, in attempts to redefine a black manhood dominant white culture continuously oppresses. It was “the white South’s racial anxieties that fostered the physical and psychological violence toward black men” (*In the Shadow* 111) – a violence these men then learn to adopt and use to turn against not just their white oppressor, but the concept of subjugation that has denied them their black identity, and more importantly, their black manhood. According to Faulkner and Wright, the fate of the black man resides in the white community’s reaction to the stereotyped threat of blackness and the imagined black beast. Perceived as violent both physically and sexually, Joe Christmas and Bigger Thomas often display over-masculinized behavior resulting from the racist belief in the inherent evil of the black race. Critic Andrew B. Leiter argues that the “fear of black masculinity has as much to do with shaping racial identity as do the visible manifestations of race” (110). Thus, the culture of racism during the Jim Crow era can be said to have influenced a novelistic image of the animalistic black man who “visibly manifests” his blackness through violence – indicating hypermasculinity. Ellison, however, is “more concerned with the way a man



confronts his individual doom than with the derivation of that doom; not pathos, but power, in its deepest inner sense, is what concerns him" (Warren 200).

Instead of focusing on the black male's victimization by the white man, Ellison creates in the invisible man a black character that extends beyond the limitations imposed on him by his racial identity, giving him choices instead of merely directing a seemingly fated path. Ellison transforms the previous novelistic tendency toward the hypermasculine "black beast" to create a more holistic and truthful representation of the black race.

### iii: Foundations of Food and Sexual Exploitation

Like Wright and Ellison, William Faulkner employs motifs of food and sex to describe the tense interplay between white and black in segregated society. As a child, Joe Christmas, of *Light in August*, learns to associate hunger with guilt and anger, a connection that in adulthood transfers over into his antagonistic sexual relations with women – symbols of domesticity and the means through which food can be distributed or withheld. The possibility of sexual relations between the mulatto Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden, a white woman who allows Joe to both live on her property and eat her food, stems subconsciously from its racially forbidden allure, but more noticeably from the male's need for a tangible promise of nutrition. Because he engages in a sexual relationship that threatens his masculinity, Christmas must rebel against both the tangible female presence of Burden and the intangible domestic "burden" she symbolizes. The protagonist of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, on the other hand, struggles to find a more

direct balance between women providers and physical encounters. By abstaining from the actual act of sexual consummation, he asserts his male independence from the female sex, negating the necessity of destruction. Like Joe Christmas, *Native Son's* Bigger Thomas also resents food offerings from white women, often refusing to eat, and only acquiring a true, unhindered appetite after reestablishing black masculine power through Mary's death. Thus, sex and the acquisition of food, two of the most primal and physical human acts, become linked at a very basic level, allowing for an intimate exchange and perhaps even greater connection between the white and black worlds as they join in sexual union, either real, in the case of Faulkner's Christmas and Ellison's protagonist, or imagined, as with Wright's Bigger Thomas. Although necessary for survival, food becomes a source of racial contrition and anger, turning hypermasculinized black males against the women who feed and reach out to them. Relying on women, specifically white women, for sustenance directly undermines their collective male pride in the vitality of black manhood, and results in both a confused understanding of sexuality and an embittered stance toward the supposed female perpetrator, or instigator of this sexual confusion and guilt.

Joe's thoughts about femininity and food stem directly from his experiences as a young boy in his adoptive home with the McEacherns. The young Joe often suffered due to food deprivation, a punishment his adoptive father deemed fitting for minor misdemeanors and acts of defiance. After one such rebellious act and subsequent punishment, his timid foster mother, going

against her husband's wishes, smuggled food into Christmas's bedroom. Though weak with hunger, Christmas rose from the bed, "took the tray and carried it to the corner and turned it upside down, dumping the dishes and food and all onto the floor. Then he returned to the bed, carrying the empty tray like it was a monstrance and he the bearer" (*Light in August* 155). By refusing to admit his physical weakness, Christmas signals through this act of destruction that he resents the implication that her female assistance holds more validation than his masculine desire for self-preservation. Only when she leaves the room does he rise from the bed and kneel in "the corner as he had not knelt on the rug, and above the outraged food kneeling, with his hands ate, like a savage, like a dog" (155). Joe's subjection "to the need for food is described as inevitable humiliation when he cannot help eating the dishes served by his adoptive mother Mrs. McEachern" (Ryo 1).

Joe believes that the rejection of femininity will bring the achievement of manhood, a belief critic Jay Watson argues Joe learns through the consideration of femininity as it concurs with "his stylization of masculinity through the repetitive imitation of other men" (Watson 154-56). Joe learns to establish his manhood through repeatedly observing McEachern's recalcitrant rejection of his wife:

There was a very kinship of stubbornness like a transmitted resemblance in their backs. Mrs McEachern was in the kitchen . . . . Neither of them so much as looked at her . . . . They went on, in steady single file, the two

backs in their rigid abnegation of all compromise more alike than actual blood could have made them (*Light in August* 148).

Thus instead of accepting Mrs. McEachern's domestic female generosity, Christmas rejects the woman's role as nurturer, hurling her food into the wall, then choosing to eat off the floor like an animal, paradoxically demeaning himself in order to uphold an exaggerated ideal of masculinity, a learned behavior where the male must hold ultimate power over the subservient and weaker female counterpart. This "manner of establishing manhood confirms the extent of the revulsion to [proffered food] . . . because femininity goes hand in hand with blackness" (Ryo 1). The novel repeatedly connects female sexuality and expressions of femininity to a racialized blackness through such phrases as "the bodiless fecund mellow voices of negro women," "the lightless hot wet primogenitive Female" (115), and "the women shenegro" (156). To Joe, women, therefore, become symbols of racial discrimination and hence rejecters of black masculinity. Furthermore, as critic Yamauchi Ryo argues, this association or link between race and gender "allows us to recognize that Joe's idea of manhood is rooted in the social norm of whiteness. Thus the meal . . . represents the connection between blackness and femininity that is constructed out of white manhood" (Ryo). By rejecting food, Joe tries to disassociate himself from this negative female presence that seems to both usurp his masculinity and draw attention to his "blackness."

The entire incident acts as a means through which Christmas later associates the giving of food, or female assistance, with male inadequacy. To eat, for Christmas, “is to submit to the needs of the body and to acknowledge dependency upon woman” (Bleikasten 292). Thus, the shame of female aid suggests an unacknowledged shame, that when ignored, “appears to be recursive, feeding upon itself, and [causing] recursion in other emotions, such as grief and fear” (Scheff 4). Faulkner emphasizes this association with fear when he details Christmas’s stumbling discovery of Burden’s isolated property while walking down a narrow dirt road, and his subsequent nighttime movement inside to steal food from the kitchen:

He . . . seemed to see in the darkness as he moved as unerringly toward the food which he wanted as if he knew where it would be; that, or were being manipulated by an agent which did know. He ate something from an invisible dish, with invisible fingers: invisible food. He did not care what it would be. He did not know that he had even wondered or tasted until his jaw stopped suddenly . . . and thinking fled for twentyfive years back down the street, past all the imperceptible corners of bitter defeats and more bitter victories . . . (*Light in August* 230).

The act of eating and the taste of this particular dish bring back flavors of memories that dance angrily across the corners of his mind. Thus, food, as a vehicle of memory, becomes an ominous mechanism of negative racial association as the “bitter victories” and “bitter defeats” of both his race and

himself rush to his mind upon ingesting the food, a stereotypical mix of flavors white culture typically associated with black society. Immediately after this brief episode, Joanna Burden reveals herself to her midnight thief, lending physicality to his emotional madness, and becoming a concrete representative of the subconscious pain he had moments before associated with food and the act of eating.

Their nighttime interlude acts as an impetus from which a troubled relationship blooms. Burden allows Joe to stay on her property, letting him sleep in a cabin close to the house for shelter and continuing to provide him with food. Their close proximity draws Burden to later seek sexual contact with Christmas – who willingly engages though emotionally distant – while Christmas remains preoccupied with the acquisition of food. The affair progresses in an extremely illicit fashion – food during the day, sex at night. Christmas had

never entered the kitchen by day save when he came to get the food which she had prepared for him and set out upon the table. And when he entered the house at night it was as he had entered it that first night; he felt like a thief, a robber, even while he mounted to the bedroom where she waited. Even after a year it was as though he entered by stealth to despoil her virginity each time anew. It was as though each turn of dark saw him faced again with the necessity to despoil again that which he had already despoiled – or never had and never would (234).

After a year of intimate involvement, Burden still only expects Christmas to either enter the house to eat or have sex, two physical acts that in part define the fundamentals of manhood; Burden stereotypes Christmas as both black and male, attempting to appeal and seduce his attentions through “masculine” means. By separating food and sex so drastically, Burden fosters a sense of masculine confusion in Christmas, which is furthered by her unfeminine approach to sexual relations, and her “almost manlike yielding” (234) that demonstrates to him the “strength and fortitude of a man” (234); sex becomes a “necessity” akin to eating - both serve as vital parts of his daily life that he resents due to Burden’s high level of involvement. As stated earlier, Christmas thinks that “it was like I was the woman and she was the man” (235). This reversal of roles frustrates and angers Christmas, adding to his previous feelings of shame over being provided for by a white woman, and resulting in a stark escalation of tension in his attitude toward his female “keeper.” Their nighttime interludes force Christmas, to first feel like a “thief” and a “robber” and, later, to mutate, by murder, into this violent despoiler Burden sets him up to become.

By masking his shame over the food provisions and reversal of sexual roles, Christmas’s previous embarrassment over his displaced manhood transforms into dysfunctional anger. The alienated and racially repressed Christmas, thus, becomes a prime example of a hypermasculinized male, introducing the theory of conflict, where the emotionally isolated black male

symbolizes a “biosocial machine that leads to cascading violence and destructiveness” (Scheff 1). Joe Christmas’s visually apparent

shame/anger may be interminable in the form of ‘helpless anger,’ or in the more explosive form, ‘humiliated fury.’ The shame-anger loop could be central to explosive conflict. If one is in a shame state with respect to another, one route of denial is to become angered at the other, whether the other is responsible or not. That is, if one feels rejected by, insulted by, or inferior to another, denial of shame can result in a shame-anger loop of unlimited intensity and duration (Scheff 6).

Burden, responsible in part for Christmas’s shame, becomes the target of his fury and object of his hate, and, ultimately, the means through which his explosive “humiliated fury” is released.

One night after yet another shameful sexual encounter that causes Christmas to question his masculinity, he enters Burden’s house, “not in eagerness, but in a quiet rage” (*Light in August* 236). Once in the bedroom, he tears at her clothes, and “talking to her, in a tense, hard, low voice [says]: ‘I’ll show you! I’ll show you bitch!’ She did not resist at all . . . But beneath his hands the body might have been the body of a dead woman not yet stiffened. But he did not desist; though his hands were hard and urgent it was with rage alone” (236). Christmas’s repressed shame becomes tainted with violent anger and a primal desire to react against the force – Joanna Burden – instigating these feelings of masculine inadequacy. After he conquers her physically, demonstrating male



power and reaffirming his masculine status in his own mind, he feels no need for food. He even goes so far as to hurl dishes of food into “the wall, the invisible wall, waiting for the crash to subside and silence to flow completely back before taking up another one” (238), calling the food, “Woman’s muck” (238). He eats invisible food with invisible fingers and throws invisible dishes into an invisible wall – all that comes into contact with Burden’s “white,” “female” food seems to permeate an aura of invisibility. Hence Christmas’s act of defiance, though an assertion of his masculinity and rejection of female aid, also symbolizes a rejection of an identity confined solely to his black heritage. He resents the way in which the white world acknowledges him, ultimately feeling more comfortable with a black definition, and reacts with violence and anger, destroying his main portals into the white world – smashing food provided by a white woman and then cutting off sexual contact with his white provider completely – in an attempt to restore some semblance of black masculine identity and control.

Though Faulkner portrays a primarily destructive white and black sexual union, Ralph Ellison chooses instead to highlight the spectrum of good and bad within the taboo white/black relationship in the novel *Invisible Man*. Ellison’s protagonist, like Christmas, uses food as a memory device, recalling the essence of the South through the taste of a yam. The drifting odor of baking yams brings “a stab of swift nostalgia” (*Invisible Man* 262), and the invisible man stops in the streets “as though struck by a shot, deeply inhaling, remembering, [his] mind

surging back, back” (262). The yams, a stereotypically black southern food, evoke positive recall and hint at a collective black memory, or racial pride, where his mind lingers on the southern ideal of a united black community. Whereas Christmas feels only bitterness upon eating traditionally black food, the invisible man feels warmth and is overcome with “a surge of homesickness . . . [and] an intense feeling of freedom – simply because [he] was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating . . . and as sweet as the yam actually was, it became like a nectar with the thought” (264). Because the protagonist’s meals are not confined to the kitchen of a white woman, and because he buys the yam with his own money, he separates himself from both female nurturing and white authority, allowing him to feel “exhilarated” and free as he eats, indicating an assertion of his male independence. The amount of freedom the protagonist feels directly relates to his personal perception of his black manhood, while inversely corresponding to shame and the need for violence. While eating the yam, the invisible man thinks, “To hell with being ashamed of what you liked. No more of that for me. I am what I am!” (266). Thus, because he no longer feels shame over eating stereotypically black food and accepts his black heritage as part of his identity, he has no need for violence, and there is no individual with whom he can associate his black guilt and subsequent aggression as does Joe Christmas with Joanna Burden. Although the invisible man often dines with Mary, Ellison’s motherly black equivalent to Faulkner’s provider Joanna Burden, their relationship inspires no hatred because as a black woman she is on equal racial

footing but lower social standing than he as a black man. Whereas a white woman would have clearly trumped him at every level, Mary represents no threat to the protagonist's male identity.

Measurements of "shame can be directly acknowledged by referring to one's inner states of insecurity, or feelings of separatedness or powerlessness" (Scheff 4). Due to the protagonist's security in his ability to provide for himself through his job, his connection to others, both black and white, through a bustling life in the city, and his feelings of power as he incites millions through inspiring speeches, his shame gauge remains significantly lower, if virtually nonexistent, when compared to Joe Christmas. Without shame and without an instigatory white female force, he possesses no masculine drive to lash out physically at his female provider. He thinks, "What a group of people we were . . . Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked. Not *all* of us, but so many" (264). He recognizes the power of food to incite humiliation in the black community, but separates himself from those who would feel shame because his black manhood remains intact, a fact which allows him to find pride, not embarrassment, in the food of his black heritage.

Although food in *Invisible Man* serves as a source of black masculine reaffirmation, drinks, a subcategory to food and both a necessity and an extravagancy, act as illusive symbols of black-white forbidden sexuality. The protagonist's first intimate interaction with a white female, the wife of a

brotherhood member, involves the offering of three possible drinks: coffee, wine, and milk. When asked which he would prefer, the invisible man replies, “‘Wine, thank you’ . . . finding the idea of milk strangely repulsive” (*Invisible Man* 412). Milk, a white liquid, often symbolizes white female fertility or sexuality, and the invisible man’s finding it “strangely repulsive” suggests a rejection of physical connection with white suppression and female reliance. His unwillingness to drink milk offered by a white woman, who “glows as though consciously acting a symbolic role of life and feminine fertility” (409), foreshadows his later reluctance to consummate his relationship with this same woman; engaging in a sexual union with a white woman would compromise his black masculine identity in the same way that ingesting milk would ultimately represent a repulsive consumption of white female fertility – he resists a white sexual partnership, showing stark progression from Joe Christmas’s early eagerness.

Although the protagonist exercises sexual restraint, when confronted with her seduction, he becomes confused, wanting to “both smash her and stay with her” (415). He is “torn between anger and fierce excitement . . . between the ideological and the biological, duty and desire” (416), and his vision pulses, “alternately clear and vague, driven by a furious bellows” (416). Her feminine qualities arouse him, but his attraction to her whiteness angers him. Only when confused by the effects of alcohol can the invisible man admit a secret and taboo attraction to white women. But because he has not been conditioned to associate guilt and shame with white women, as has Joe Christmas, he is able to vacillate

between aggression and desire, and ultimately between a desire for masculine power and the necessity of male self-preservation. He allows his fury to momentarily consume his senses and transform into sexual tension, while at the same time remaining aware of the fact that giving into this temptation would negate the pureness of his black identity; she is a “beautiful dreamer” (417) and he her “black nightmare” (417). He imagines violence; tempted by the power it would bring him as a black male, yet unlike Christmas, he has found a way to walk the line between two opposing worlds, between black and white, violence and abstinence. The invisible man exists somewhere between black and white. Although he does not display stereotypical male aggression, he is hypermasculine because he possesses the ability and mindset to digress into violence at any moment as evidenced by his imagined conquest; the dream remains a nightmare restrained.

The protagonist’s later seduction of Sybil, another white woman, involves an array of food and drinks including a supply of “wine, whiskey and liqueur, extra ice cubes, and assortments of fruit, cheese, nuts, candy and other delicacies” (*Invisible Man* 516). He arranges an excessive display of nonessential food and drink items, appealing to her sense of white entitlement, where alcohol symbolizes the masculine power drive and food the domestic female drive. Sybil exploits her need for dominance by becoming “more interested in the drinks, in which [he] had to join her glass for glass” (516), and making the drinks too strong – “which she liked too well” (516). With each drink, her sense of

empowerment heightens; lending her a pseudo-masculinity that ultimately overshadows and emasculates her black counterpart. As a sober female in a white male driven society, Sybil can relate to and sympathize with the protagonist's low social standing and sense of self-worth. But as an intoxicated woman, she unleashes her suppressed need for white masculine power, thus, demeaning the black protagonist into the vision of a stereotypical black entertainer and hypersexual being that society perpetrates. Racist society will always view the protagonist as a potential rapist and thief, and knowing this, Sybil asks him to be both – to rape her and rob her of her “white female” innocence. The protagonist recognizes in her plea a thinly disguised quest for power and he asks himself,

Who's taking revenge on whom? But why be surprised, when that's what they hear all their lives. When [rape by a black man is] made into a great power and they're taught to worship all types of power? With all the warnings against it, some are bound to want to try it out for themselves. The conquerors conquered. Maybe a great number secretly want it; maybe that's why they scream when it's farthest from possibility (520).

By asking him to rape her, Sybil attempts to demean the invisible man, placing him in a position where she can control his sexuality, and hence, his exhibited masculinity. Though momentarily seduced by her drunken femininity, her request ultimately angers and humiliates him – she evokes in him feelings of “pity and self-disgust” (525). Intoxicated, tempted, and enraged, the invisible

man does not succumb to violence as do Joe Christmas and Bigger Thomas. He refrains from the stereotypical violent reaction attributed to his race because he recognizes the reaction his black skin evokes in Sybil, and while resenting her reactionary quest for power, forgives the woman for falling prey to the transgressions of an unequal society. By forgiving her, he establishes a psychological superiority over her, thus reaffirming his manhood through nonviolent means. Although he does not react physically, his internalized hypermasculine need for violence makes his search for a male identity extremely potent when faced with a demeaning display of female sexuality.

*Native Son's* Bigger Thomas grapples with a similar negative connection between food, feelings of shame, and white suppression. In a moment of contemplation, Bigger asks his friend Gus, "You know where the white folks live?" [then] doubled his fist and struck his solar plexus, [saying,] 'Right down here in my stomach...Every time I think of 'em, I *feel* 'em . . . . It's like fire'" (24). Immediately setting up a juxtaposition between food and segregation, Bigger links hunger, through his stomach, to the resulting despair and shame of racism.<sup>3</sup> When confronted by his mother and sister at breakfast about a possible job for the Dalton's, a rich white family, he becomes angry, feeling cheapened by the necessity of working for whites, and keeps repeating, "I wish you'd let me eat" (15). This desire to eat without female interruption signifies an associated anger toward women, which contrasts with the desire for solitary, masculine

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<sup>3</sup> Wright explores this theme more substantially in his autobiography *Black Boy*.

nourishment. The shame evoked at the prospect of working for white people emasculates him, diminishing his sense of male pride in being able to support his family. His shattered male confidence could only be rebuilt now

through action so violent that it would make him forget. These were the rhythms of his life: indifference and violence; moments of silence and moments of anger –like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force. Being this way was a need of his as deep as eating (31).

With this weakened sense of manhood is born a deeply rooted need for masculine reaffirmation through violence, which he equates with the primal male need for food. Thus, Bigger's environment essentially conditions him to link hunger negatively with both females and white oppression, and, ultimately, with violence.

Like Joe Christmas, Bigger Thomas enters his white employer's home through the kitchen (*Native Son* 52). On his first day of work, Bigger feels relieved to be "out of the front part of the house, but still not quite comfortable" (55) as he moves from the entryway of the foyer to the internment of the kitchen. The relief he feels relates to the lifting of white male power the front of the house symbolizes as an area of more formal white distinction: the foyer symbolizes the intersection of the external and internal white worlds, a room fluctuating between white expectation and black reality. Yet he does not experience complete relief because he has left one area of confinement only to



enter another – the kitchen, an area of white female supremacy; he is uncomfortable in the kitchen because the white cook's female power usurps his own sense of black masculinity. Once in the kitchen, however, Bigger smells "the odor of frying bacon and realized that he was very hungry" (56). He accepts food from the cook because, as a servant of the house, she outranks him solely based on her white skin, and, thus, does not represent the same threat to his masculinity as a white male would have.

When Mary Dalton, a white female who evokes sexual shame in Bigger, offers him food, unknowingly demeaning him in front of his black community, he rejects the food both mentally and physically. In the "black" restaurant, Mary and Jan order fried chicken and beer, trying subconsciously to appeal to Bigger's black appetite:

Bigger picked up a piece of chicken and bit it. When he tried to chew he found his mouth dry. It seemed that the very organic functions of his body had altered; and when he realized why, when he understood the cause, he could not chew his food. After two or three bites, he stopped and sipped his beer (74).

By refusing the food of his black heritage, Bigger repudiates Mary and her supposition that she can gain his confidences through his stomach, that she can buy an entire race's support and erase centuries of white enforced hardship through one black man's meal. Mary makes Bigger feel ashamed of his heritage so much so that he cannot even force himself to eat, and because he cannot eat,

he is robbed of a necessary primal, and specifically male associated, activity – the ingestion and acquisition of food. Thus, through the principle of associative anger and shame, Bigger connects Mary with his feelings of male inadequacy and mentally fixates his anger on her in much the same way as the invisible man targets Sybil and Joe Christmas preys on Joanna Burden. Devoid of male confidence, Bigger feels the tugs of violence gnawing at his subconscious, a need that for him runs as deep as that of eating (31). Through a series of situational errors not present for the invisible man, Bigger accidentally kills Mary. As stated previously, although her murder is unintentional, the disposal of her body is purposeful and highly violent, signifying his hypermasculine need for violence and for total control of the female form.

Food and sex act as two highly definitive aspects of black masculinity in the novels *Light in August*, *Invisible Man*, and *Native Son*. Each male struggles to define his black masculinity against white female forces that continuously, though often unknowingly, undermine society's preconceived notions of "maleness." By focusing on food and sex as power outlets, Joe Christmas, the invisible man, and Bigger Thomas become physical embodiments of the hypermasculine archetype. Relying on white women for food results in feelings of shame and inadequacy, which transform into anger and aggression toward the women who reach out to them, making food and white female sexuality a source of racial contrition. These black male characters grapple with the raw correlation between the food they eat and the sexuality that tempts them,

becoming literal embodiments of the standard ideal of masculinity, where men focus on food and sex as power outlets. Racist society imposes a set of strict sexual standards and expectations onto black males, attempting to control and limit sexual impulses while conversely projecting a hypersexual image onto all black men. This push and pull of image versus expectation leaves only confusion and frustration in its wake, drawing a comparison to similar constraining white male expectations for white female sexuality. In order to free themselves from these stereotypical assumptions, Joe Christmas, the invisible man, and Bigger Thomas rebel against the white patriarchal establishment of gender roles, specifically the suppression of black masculinity against ideals of white female sexuality and domesticity.

#### iv: Conclusion

Manliness, in the early nineteen hundreds, was an ideology of “evolutionism...a standard to live up to, an ideal of male perfectibility to be achieved” (Bederman 27). The perfect man denoted a product of the “perfect” race, a category from which the “savage” or nonwhite individual remained perpetually excluded. Whereas the term “manliness” was used to suggest a civilized, superior white power, the term “masculinity” referred to the “racial inheritance . . . of the [savage],” or black male:

White male bodies had evolved through centuries of Darwinistic survival of the fittest. They were the authors and agents of civilized advancement, the chosen people of evolution and the cutting edge of millennial

progress. Who better to make decisions for the rest of humankind, whether female or men of the lower races? It was imperative to all civilization that white males assume the power to ensure the continued millennial advancement of white civilization (Berdeman 42).

The white battle for supremacy attempted to obliterate, through both racial segregation and gender-based oppression, black masculine and white female “advancement,” specifically targeting black males as the greatest threat to the delicate balance of “civilized” white power. Denied power, humanity, racial recognition, and ultimately their very manhood by white males, many black men strove to redefine or recreate an individual sense of black masculinity.

Authors William Faulkner, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, portray this internal struggle toward a gendered black definition against the opposing barbarity of racial hatred. Each revises and expands on the work of preceding writers, creating a movement toward a more holistic image of both black masculinity and black male identity. Although Faulkner presents a more accurate image of his mulatto protagonist, Joe Christmas, in *Light in August* than do many previous white authors by diverging from the “happy slave” stereotype, he still imbues Christmas with characteristics of the stereotypical “black male rapist,” an image that “represented the opposite of civilized manliness . . . [and left] primitive masculinity in its purest, most primal form” by having Joe rape his white female “keeper” (Berdeman 49). Bigger Thomas, in Wright’s *Native Son*, also rapes, and succumbs to his sexual desires: “the male sex drive itself was

widely considered a masculine trait – all men, regardless of race or moral status, had it” (49). Ellison alludes to this myth by including a scene where a white woman solicits the protagonist for a fetishized “rape fantasy.” Faulkner, Wright, and Ellison all use the stereotype of the “black rapist” to dramatize the masculine struggle for dominance between white and black men over supremacy of the white female body; white women were seen as “the forbidden fruit, the untouchable property, the ultimate symbol of white male power” (Smith 273). Food induced sexuality and white female temptation appear in all three novelists’ works, demonstrating the influence of racist thought on black protagonist portrayal, and ultimately on depictions of black masculinity. Depicting the black male sex drive in relation to white females represents the means through which these authors pit the vitality of the black struggle for masculinity against the dominant white “manliness” that had previously overshadowed and essentially eradicated black masculine identity from societal recognition.

Faulkner, Wright, and Ellison recognize that this stereotypical “savage” image is not a universal reality; however, they do choose to focus their novels on black protagonists who fall victim to the white power struggle to demonstrate the possible ensuing horrors of racial oppression. Joe Christmas, Bigger Thomas, and the Invisible Man all revolt against the suffocating power of white male authority, striving, often through violence, to declare their own presence and black authority. In order to avoid the overwhelming emasculating effects of

racism, these three protagonists assume, to varying degrees, the stereotypical savage image attributed to their black skin, adopting and redirecting the “primitive violence” (Bederman 99) learned from white lynching mobs. This aggression, when coupled with the opportunity for sexual exploitation, signifies two male identity triggers. Each protagonist overemphasizes these triggers, creating a mutated version of the typical masculine ideal – in other words, a hypermasculine or exaggerated expression of masculinity – to reestablish a virtually nonexistent black masculinity and declare independence from white authority. Though Joe and Bigger gain a pseudo-physical domination over their oppressors, only the Invisible man truly resists oppression without conceding to white cerebral racist manipulation.

Joe Christmas is brutally murdered and castrated at the end of *Light in August*, Bigger Thomas faces an imminent death by court order, and the invisible man ostracizes himself from society, escaping underground to prevent both castration and death. Only in death and through castration can Joe Christmas finally “be the [coveted] ‘victim’ of menstruation,” expelling his black blood and releasing his mulatto body from racial definition. In death, Christmas’s eyes looked “peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable” (*Light in August* 513), and Joseph Urgo argues that “his body reaches a kind of apotheosis in its forced regeneration, and Christmas emerges . . . a cleansed man” (Urgo 401). With this description, Faulkner seems to suggest that Joe is finally free from the black cage of his body and cleansed of what Urgo calls “racial and sexual exclusiveness”

(401); his white and black blood need no longer battle for dominance and racist culture can no longer imprison him within his black skin. Death seems to bring Joe the ultimate masculine definition, conveying a suggestion of freedom from definition and releasing him, in a sense, from white masculine control. Similarly, the prospect of death brings Bigger clarity because he finally understands why he killed and his need for masculine recognition (*Native Son* 387). Bigger, like Joe, seems to accept death as a logical progression to his quest for masculine identity, where dying becomes a final step toward gaining freedom from white oppression. This escapist death theory hints at the ominous spiraling effects of segregation, revealing the possible horrible consequences of America's willing blindness to the black plight.

Conversely, the invisible man's self-segregation underground at the end of the novel remains optional. Although he does not die, he appears to willingly enter into a limbo-like phase, hiding in the sewers because he cannot face the reality above. He thinks, "I could only move ahead or stay here, underground. So I would stay here until I was chased out . . . I would take up residence underground. The end was in the beginning" (*Invisible Man* 571).

In a racist society where self-segregation or, worse, death seem to represent the only release from oppression, Faulkner, Wright, and Ellison attempt to open America's eyes to the vital presence and humanity of the "invisible" black man, portraying the oppressed black male with increasing accuracy to reform his status as a marginal man, both in and out of literature.

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